

TYLER COURIER-TIMES- TELEGRAPH

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Snake Antivenin Drug Maker Stands Out During Hurricanes

BRENTWOOD, Tenn. (AP) — East Texas resident Jodie Richey was trying to escape Hurricane Rita when another disaster hit — her 3-year-old daughter was bit by a rattlesnake in the family's yard.

The little girl nearly died from the venom, which caused her leg to swell and turn black.

"It happened so quickly. As tiny as she is ... I was so scared," said Richey, who lives in Onalaska, which is about 85 miles north of Houston near Lake Livingston.

Her daughter was saved by CroFab, a snake antivenin made by Protherics PLC, a British drug company that has recently become the main snakebite antidote manufacturer in the U.S.

Federal officials turned to Protherics for antivenin to treat the increase in snakebites that followed hurricanes Katrina and Rita when rain and floodwaters drove cottonmouths, copperheads and rattlesnakes from their natural habitats.

Protherics, whose U.S. headquarters are located in suburban Nashville, has also seen an increase in demand for CroFab as more people in fast-growing suburbs cross paths with snakes.

"Every year, more is required, and we're planning for it. We're planning to make more for next year," Protherics U.S. President Saul Komisar said.

Shortly after Katrina hit, Food and Drug Administration and other federal officials contacted

Protherics to see if adequate supplies of its snake antivenin could be sent to the Gulf Coast.

"We anticipated that hundreds of people could be affected," said Jonathan Goldsmith, deputy director in the office of blood research and review for the FDA. "We wanted to prepare for what we thought would be the worst-case scenario."

Tom Arnold, medical director of the Louisiana Poison Control Center in Shreveport, La., said the worst-case scenario didn't happen, but there were still dozens more snakebites than usual.

It's difficult to determine an exact number, he said, because lines of communication were down after the storms and not all bites were reported.

"It's historically true that after any big storms come through, we always see more bites because of snakes being displaced, people going back in the clean-up phases and coming into contact with the snakes," Arnold said.

There were nearly 2,900 reports of pit viper bites in 2004 — up by about 100 incidents over 2003, Dart said. That's a large increase over 2002 when there were only about 2,230 bites, and Dart estimates thousands of bites go unreported each year.

The number of bites by poisonous pit viper snakes has increased as the growth of the suburbs has collided with the snakes' habitats, said Richard Dart, director of the Rocky Mountain Poison and Drug center in Denver.

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